

## Article

# Sustainability of Heritage Villages through Eco-Tourism Investment (Case Study: Al-Khabra Village, Saudi Arabia)

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**Abstract:** This study explores the reasons for the failure to sustain the rehabilitation of Al-Khabra as a heritage village for tourism. Despite the rehabilitation activities since 2007 and the comprehensive plans for the development, protection, and operation of the village, tourism activities are limited due to the restricted availability of qualified buildings, infrastructure, and services. This has made the investment in the village economically unviable. This study aims to propose sustainability strategies for heritage villages by investing in eco-tourism. This study used a qualitative descriptive approach by analyzing the rehabilitation experience through available reports and studies, field observations, and interviews. A holistic and environmental approach was proposed based on the integration of cultural and environmental elements to promote eco-tourism in the village. This study recommends the development of national policies that regulate the preservation of local resources and biodiversity within an integrated framework that enhances the unique environmental advantages of the village and encourages investment in it.

**Keywords:** Al-Khabra heritage village; eco-tourism; mud buildings; sustainable development; community participation; tourism marketing



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## 1. Introduction

The tourism sector is one of the critical sources of economic growth and development in many countries worldwide. The global experience over the past several decades indicates that the tourism sector has become a significant sector in the global economy. The tourism industry has become one of the leading industries today and one of the income sources. For example, according to the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC) reports, the travel and tourism industry has created more than one million jobs per month, directly or indirectly, worldwide during the past century. Job opportunities have increased rapidly in quantities and varied in tasks. Either directly, such as in hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions, transportation, and others, or indirectly by providing many work opportunities with other economic sectors that provide many of the essential goods and services required by the tourism sector.

Eco-tourism, according to the International Eco-tourism Society (TIES), is based on basic rules that include the preservation of the environment, the participation of local communities, and the cultural experience of tourists [1,2]. The tourism sector's contribution to the Arab countries for the year 2019 amounted to about 11.4% of the GDP, amounting to SAR 313.6 billion, of which the sector's share in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was about SAR 79.5 billion [3]. This increase in revenues is due to the Kingdom's Vision 2030, which encourages domestic tourism and attracts tourists from abroad. The Kingdom has many tourism components that qualify it to occupy an important position in the tourism sector. For example, the Kingdom has a wide variety of natural environments, local cultures, archaeological sites, and heritage villages, which form an integrated tourism system. However, further development of such natural resources is needed. Therefore, the national tourism structural plan aims to lay the foundation stone for the proposed spatial

strategy for a long-term tourism development process in the Kingdom and reach a wide geographical distribution of tourism activities.

The ancient village of Al-Khabra is one of the most important heritage towns in the Kingdom and is also considered one of the most prominent tourist sites in the Qassim region. Unfortunately, the village went through a period of neglect that led to the deterioration of many of its buildings. However, the coordinated efforts and practical cooperation between the emirate of the region, represented by the Tourism Development Council, the Ministry of Tourism, represented by the authority's branch in the region, and the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs, represented by the Municipality of Al-Khabra, restored life to the village and was able to place it among the heritage towns on the Kingdom's tourist map. A comprehensive development plan has been prepared to rehabilitate the heritage village and preserve its urban heritage, in addition to an operational proposal for its development and the development of its tourism resources. The restoration process began in 2007. This process was under the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage supervision, the follow-up of the emirate of the region, and the municipality's efforts. The heritage village rehabilitation project seeks to invest in the cultural heritage of the village to find an economic model to diversify sources of income by creating an economic identity that serves the city and the tourism sector in the region. This study continues the previous efforts represented in the development of tourism resources in the heritage village of Al-Khabra as a proposed model for the sustainability of heritage villages.

Sustainable development generally aims to promote economic growth, social integration, and environmental protection. Therefore, sustainable heritage tourism monitors and controls the use of natural resources, encourages efforts to preserve the tangible heritage and local products, promotes culture and intangible heritage, and creates job opportunities for local communities [4]. Community development through tourism in rural heritage areas is a growing tourism trend attracting destinations to advance in the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. However, developing a rural heritage tourism model that delivers sustainable and resilient social and economic changes to communities is complex. It must depend on the long-term participation of all relevant stakeholders, such as government administrations and agencies, tourist-destination marketing organizations, and the local community.

Experts' opinions are divided about the outlook for the global tourism sector in the post-pandemic period. A group led by economists is calling for intensifying activities to compensate for tourism's losses and declining contributions to the GDP, especially since tourism has proven to be a successful tool for promoting rapid economic growth based on the aftermath of the boom in mass tourism after World War II. The other party, led by social scientists and humanists, calls for the necessity of controlling the management of tourism for more comprehensive sustainability by expanding the circle of attention to tourism. They argue that although tourism brings economic benefits, recreational pleasures, and development prosperity, it is not without adverse effects that have been reflected in multiple aspects, such as the environment and the rights of local communities [5].

Some studies indicate that the most crucial challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic are to collectively learn from this global tragedy to accelerate the transformation of the global tourism system to tourism more in line with sustainable development goals, including maximizing the role of domestic tourism [6–8]. Furthermore, the pandemic has affected destinations for some tourists who prefer places closer to home, places open to nature, and places less crowded. As such, rural tourism has gained increasing appeal and is likely to gain popularity in the coming years.

The cultural value of heritage village tourism can be preserved through a range of economic activities that promote protection and investment. One study indicates that the promotion of applied models to increase the effectiveness of cultural heritage as an economic production factor is one of the most pressing issues currently faced by the public and private sectors at the international level for their contribution to economic growth and sustainable development [9]. Furthermore, heritage village tourism fulfills the desires of a

broad spectrum of tourists, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, for combining the pleasure of the trip, experiencing the local culture, and discovering the identity of places.

Mobile technology is a major influence on tourism, with mobile-related devices, data and services, multiple travel concepts, and travel modes emerging or being developed further. According to [10] the research of mobile technology in tourism can be divided into three phases and is now seen as the next technological wave that can fundamentally change tourism and hotels. In the area of social sciences, further exploration is needed to explore related research in the areas of transportation and IT.

A recent study [11] examined the current and potential benefits and costs of RFID in the retail sector, as well as the findings of a survey conducted by Hungarian consumers. The paper suggested a solution to the privacy problem of current RFID applications, which would be integrated with NFC-enabled mobile phones that included a user interface to allow consumers to gain control over radio frequency communication.

The village of “Puertomingalvo” is one of the 10 successful examples of sustainable heritage villages. The village is located in eastern Spain and is one of the villages that has preserved its heritage structure intact. This village was founded in the Islamic era as a small settlement. The village has a unique local character, as it was built on a hill overlooking the surrounding area, and the urban environments grew and organically adapted to the topography. The village still maintains traditional construction using local materials and building techniques inherited from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD. Similar to other rural settlements, the village suffered from the inability to adapt to successive and rapid life transformations, which threatened its existence and continuity.

To preserve this village and others, it has been subject to study, the goal of which was to investigate the built environment’s characteristics and values to establish harmonious and comprehensive tourist activities in the traditional villages. The study adopted a participatory technique and concluded with a program enhancing cooperation via a fair and sustainable basis while also respecting the unique nature of these locations. The program includes integrated tourism activities that connect visitors to this historical reality and create authentic experiences through the investment of tangible and intangible heritage to sustain such settlements [12]. Accordingly, heritage tourism can be interpreted as the result of social and economic trends that characterize our time, where the central aspect of modern culture is the search for an authentic and distinctive cultural experience [13].

Community participation is crucial to the success and sustainability of eco-tourism investments. The involvement of local communities in eco-tourism development promotes sustainable tourism practices, enhances the quality of tourism products and services, creates employment opportunities, and fosters cultural preservation. Community participation is also a means of ensuring that eco-tourism benefits are equitably distributed among all stakeholders, including local communities, and fosters long-term partnerships between tourism stakeholders and communities [14].

The significance of involving the community in tourism planning has led to the development of the Community-Based Tourism (CBT) approach, which aims to improve the relationship between local communities and tourists [15]. Studies have shown that the sustainability of tourist villages depends on both formal and informal leaders within the community. In the case of Pampang Village in Indonesia, policymakers and strategic leaders have played a crucial role in promoting sustainable management practices that prioritize tourism [16]. At the same time, the active participation of community members has had a positive impact on the development of rural areas and has fostered a positive attitude towards indigenous culture. Similarly, in a study of the village of Rijal Alma’ in Saudi Arabia, the local community played a significant role in rehabilitating the village through a three-stage process: planning, implementation, and evaluation [17]. The study highlights the importance of developing a framework that facilitates community participation in the urban rehabilitation of heritage areas in Saudi Arabia. This framework aims to enhance the effectiveness of community involvement and ensure its sustainability in the rehabilitation process.

The importance of engaging the local community in a restoration project is multi-faceted. Firstly, involving the community ensures that the project is respectful and considerate of the traditional way of life of the village's residents. Secondly, active participation from locals instills a sense of pride and ownership in the restored village, generating interest in preserving its cultural heritage and fostering a community spirit. Thirdly, community involvement promotes the economic viability of the project by offering training and employment opportunities in tourism-related fields such as hospitality, tour guiding, and artisanal crafts. This contributes to the sustainable economic growth of the area [18].

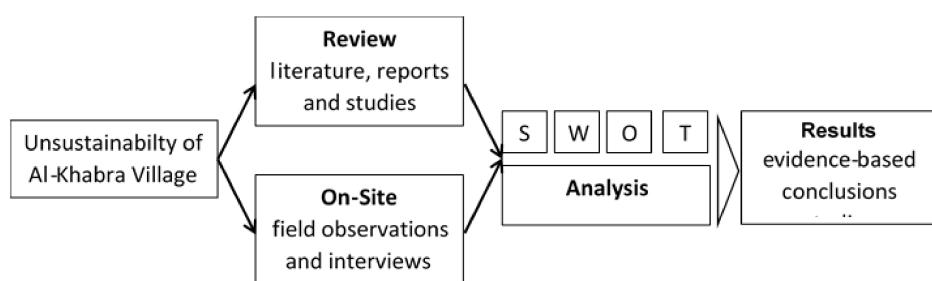
## 2. The Aim of This Study

Following the initial process of restoring the heritage village of Al Khabra that started in 2007, a comprehensive study was conducted to develop and rehabilitate the village, which culminated in the development of an urban and engineering vision and a protection and operation plan in 2010. However, insufficient financial funding at that time prevented the implementation of most of the results of that study. Therefore, the restoration was limited to the center of the village, including the market, the mosque, and some buildings, and by different work teams that applied various methods, some results of which did not appeal to those interested in the urban heritage or the local community. Nowadays, the village is operated for official visits, periodic events, and seasonal festivals. This limited exploitation does not encourage the acceleration of the restoration process, which makes many buildings suffer from a lack of protection and preservation and suffer further deterioration. Additionally, the seasonal operation may not be economically feasible and therefore does not help the sustainability of the heritage village, especially in light of unorganized marketing and uncoordinated competition between the landmarks of the region. This study argues that coordination, instead of competing, among the landmarks of the region's cities and villages converging within a comprehensive tourism marketing model, will qualify the Qassim region to become a feasible tourist attraction.

However, this study aims to develop sustainability strategies for heritage villages through eco-tourism investment by assessing the current situation of the heritage village of Al-Khabra and comparing it with the previously prepared rehabilitation and protection plan. In addition, this study aims to identify the obstacles and challenges facing implementing such plans and provides recommendations that benefit future sustainability studies for other heritage villages in the Kingdom.

## 3. The Methodology of This Study

The present study utilized a descriptive methodology to investigate the rehabilitation experience of Al-Khabra, as a heritage village. To achieve this, a comprehensive approach was adopted, incorporating a review of relevant reports and studies, as well as on-site field observations and interviews, to analyze the outcomes and impact of rehabilitation efforts. The review component of this study focused on identifying the location, origin, features, and urban and architectural characteristics of the village, while the analytical aspect entailed a SWOT analysis based on the results of field observations and interviews. The purpose of this methodology was to provide recommendations for the enhancement and development of future rehabilitation efforts while maintaining strict adherence to rigorous academic standards suitable for research purposes. This approach was selected to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, which is essential for informed and evidence-based conclusions "See Figure 1".



**Figure 1.** Research Framework and workflow.

#### 4. Overview of the Study Area

Tourism has emerged as an important sector in Saudi Arabia's economy in recent years, as the country has undertaken significant reforms to attract foreign tourists and diversify its economy beyond oil. The Saudi government has implemented several policies to develop the tourism sector, including the establishment of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, the launch of the Saudi Vision 2030 program, and the opening up of new tourist attractions such as the Red Sea Project and NEOM.

The legal restrictions in Saudi Arabia can influence the attributes of potential international tourists. Public conduct in the country adheres to Islamic customs, including the prohibition of alcohol and the requirement for modest attire, although some flexibility has been introduced in recent times. Notably, the mandate for women to wear headscarves has been lifted. While these limitations may dissuade certain prospective visitors, they may also appeal to others seeking a unique cultural and social setting.

As a result of such policies, the number of international tourist arrivals in Saudi Arabia increased from 18,000 in 2011 to 16.3 million in 2019. This represents a compound annual growth rate of 65.3% over the period [19]. Similarly, the number of domestic tourist trips increased from 37.6 million in 2017 to 49.4 million in 2018, representing a year-on-year growth rate of 31.4%). International tourists spent USD 19.6 billion in the country in 2019, while domestic tourists spent USD 11.9 billion [19].

Tourism is contributing significantly to the country's economy and creates employment opportunities. The total contribution of travel and tourism to Saudi Arabia's GDP was USD 51.6 billion in 2019, equivalent to 9.3% of the country's total GDP. Tourism also creates significant employment opportunities in Saudi Arabia. The tourism sector supported 1.5 million jobs in the country in 2019, equivalent to 8.1% of the total employment [19–22].

Sustainable development is a key goal of Saudi Arabia's tourism policy, and several studies have examined the environmental and social impacts of tourism in the country. One study explored the potential of eco-tourism in Saudi Arabia and suggested that the country's natural attractions, such as its cultural heritage and wildlife reserves, could be developed sustainably to attract environmentally conscious tourists [4]. Another study explored the potential of cultural tourism in Saudi Arabia and suggested that cultural tourism destinations and historic architecture could be leveraged to attract domestic and international tourists [6]. However, it has been argued that a more cohesive and coordinated policy framework is needed to ensure the sustainable development of the tourism sector [6].

The country's ambitious tourism development plans indicate that this sector is likely to continue to grow in the coming years. Therefore, efforts have been focused on enhancing the factors of tourist satisfaction and loyalty through the optimal investment in distinguished heritage sites and other attraction locations to enhance and enrich the tourism experience [21].

Al-Khabra village is one such attractive heritage site. Al-Khabra village has been the subject of many studies focusing on the restoration efforts and how cultural heritage preservation and sustainable tourism development can contribute to the economic and social development of local communities [21–26]. However, none of these studies addressed previously produced comprehensive development plans or barriers to their implementation

nor proposed the integration of cultural and environmental elements to promote a holistic and sustainable approach to village tourism development.

Al-Khabra village is one of the heritage villages of the Qassim region. Data from the Saudi Ministry of Tourism indicate that the Qassim region received about 7428 thousand tourists in 2022, but there are no official statistics available for the number of tourists who specifically visit Al-Khabra traditional village (Ministry of Tourism, 2022). The village dates back more than 400 years and is located approximately in the middle of the Qassim region, on the course of Wadi Al-Rummah, where water accumulates for long periods, which earned it its name. The word Al-Khabra in the local dialect of the Arabic language means the swamp [5]. It also has another name by which it is known, which is “Al-Jamshah”. Al-Jamshah is crushed clay, a description of the nature of the land after it has dried. Due to the abundance of water and the fertility of the land, Al-Khabra has been famous for the quality of its agricultural products, such as palm dates and “Ma’iya” (a kind of wheat).

Historical references agree that the first to settle Al-Khabra were “Al-Afaleq” (a branch of a major Arabian tribe), but sources differ significantly on the beginning of its settlement. It was mentioned in one of the references on the history of the establishment of the village that it dates back to the year 1009 AH (1600 AD), and another reference claims that it dates back to the year 1084 AH (1673 AD), based on a unique system of date documentation [8], which uses letters to express numbers as follows “See Table 1”.

**Table 1.** Letters to express numbers [8].

100	ق	10	ي	ا	1
200	ر	20	ك	ب	2
300	ش	30	ل	ج	3
400	ت	40	م	د	4
500	ث	50	ن	هـ	5
600	خـ	60	سـ	وـ	6
700	ذـ	70	عـ	زـ	7
800	ضـ	80	فـ	حـ	8
900	ظـ	90	صـ	طـ	9
1000	غـ				

Accordingly, the numerical establishment date corresponding to the literal date of “Khabra Afaliq” (خبرا عفالق) is as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The numerical establishment date corresponding to the literal date of Khabra Afaliq [8].

Total	ق	ل	ا	ف	ع	ا	ر	ب	خـ
1084	100	30	1	80	70	1	200	2	600

While others refer to the beginning of its establishment as the year 1140 AH (1727 AD) [7]). The village is known as an oasis providing water and trees. Its inception, as an urban settlement, dates back to the year 1009 AH when the first well was dug in it and the construction of the wall was completed in the year 1140 AH.

The people of Al-Khabra completely deserted the village due to the frequent floods of Wadi Al-Rummah. The frequent floods of the valley prompted the government to issue an order to evacuate the village entirely in the year 1398 AH (1978 AD). The village has become a prominent historical landmark in the region because it preserved integrated heritage features in good condition.

The heritage village of Al-Khabra is in a central location within the Qassim region at the crossroads of the main roads that connect all its cities and governorates. Where the

highway is only about 1 km away from it along the north border, and the airport is about 30 km away. Al-Khabra village mediates the cities of the Qassim region. The village is 5 km away from "Riyadh Al-Khabra" and "Al-Bukairiyah", 10 km from "Al-Bada'i", 20 km from "Rass", 30 km from "Unayzah", 40 km from "Buraidah", 50 km from "Uyun Al-Jawa", and 60 km from "Al-Mithnb", "Al-Nabhanieh", and "Al-Shmasiyah".

The village can be described as small in size compared to its counterparts from the old metropolises of the Qassim region. The village is distinguished by its concentric shape with a radius of approximately 200 m, and it is surrounded by a protection wall interspersed with several security towers. The total area of Al-Khabra heritage village is estimated to be 125,600 m<sup>2</sup>, while the estimated area of the building space of the village is 80,000 m<sup>2</sup>. The number of housing units is approximately 400, which constitutes 80% of the building block. The village has four main gates to the east, north, west, and south, each leading to the main street that connects the public square in the center of the village called the "Majlis", where the market is held. The village is permeated by a gradual network of open spaces starting from the public market square to urban squares between a group of houses, representing semi-public spaces. Some of these semi-public spaces provide "Hesaw", which are surface water wells used for domestic uses. Then the spaces are further graded to reach the semi-private areas represented by the open areas in front of the homes, and finally with the private spaces, represented by the inner courtyards of the dwellings.

The building materials used in the village are local materials consisting of stone and clay for building foundations, clay for building walls, wood for building roofs, and clay and plaster for plastering and decoration works. Some buildings rest on four to five courses of stone topped by a mud wall. This method strengthens the foundation to resist shock hazards and natural erosion factors, especially water. The construction of the walls is usually either in the form of "Orooqs", which are continuous horizontal layers of mud, or "Labin", which are mud bricks. Usually, the walls are plastered with a layer of mud, and the lower part of the interior spaces is decorated with plaster. These mud walls support the roofs, consisting of stems of tamarisk trees or palm trunks covered with mats of palm fronds and a layer of mud. Sometimes the roofs of traditional village buildings rest on wooden or stone pillars.

Al-Khabra is also famous and unique for a cemetery adjacent to its eastern wall from the inside, called the martyrs' cemetery. This cemetery bears witness to the valor, courage, and loyalty of its people in the process of the unification of Saudi Arabia. The village was able to stand up to the army of "Ibn Rasheed", the fiercest enemy of "Ibn Saud". The army of Ibn Rasheed besieged it for 4 months and could not subdue it, even though the army bombed the village with cannons and burned its farms to force its people to surrender [27].

The village is rich in many unique urban and architectural features, including the concentric shape of the master plan of the village and the semi-private social courtyards distributed throughout the village. The concentric urban form of the village is unique to the urban settlements of the region. This may be because the village has been developed on a hill near the course of Wadi Al-Rummah. The curved formation reduces the negative impact resulting from the flooding of the valley on the outer walls, unlike the straight formation. In addition, this circular formation enhances the security fortification of the village, as it is known that the circular shape provides the largest floor area with the least external circumference. This formation is visible in the exterior of the village. It is noticeable that there is more than one ring road in the village of Al-Khabra, through which it is possible to infer the stages of the historical growth of the village.

According to a resident, the village went through three stages of development in its history. Strikingly, these stages correspond mostly with streets and ring roads. One possible explanation for the existence of these ring roads is the gradual process of settlement and urbanization. Where a group of Bedouins wanted to urbanize, so they built homes for themselves outside the walls. When those gatherings multiplied and proved their loyalty, the village included them to enhance its strength by removing the old wall and building a

new one, and thus we obtained circular streets linking the village on multiple historical stages (Figure 2).

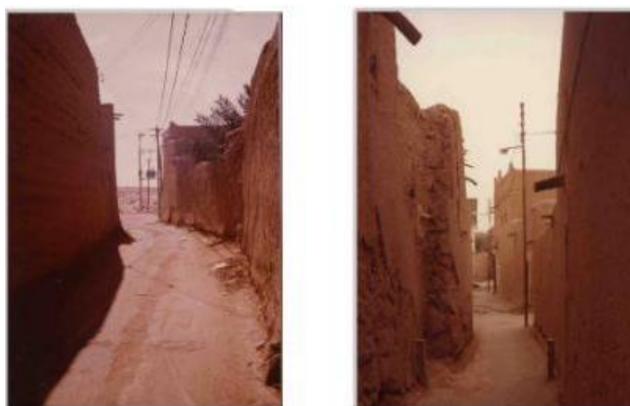


**Figure 2.** A plan of the village showing its main features from the general shape, roads, and spaces.

There are semi-public social spaces or courtyards distributed in the village. The residents of the buildings overlooking these spaces share in taking care of the spaces and use them as a source of water for daily domestic use in a symbiotic social system, which may be the only one in the area. The village, like other mud villages, is characterized by the sensitivity of dealing with water. This can be inferred from several scenes, perhaps the most important of which is the design of gutters (drainage of roof water), the foundations of buildings, and the inclinations of roads and corridors (rainwater drainage). To prevent the accumulation of rainwater on the roofs of buildings, pitched roofs are designed to drain water through gutters made of wood with an appropriate length and angle to drain the required amount of water. The shapes of the gutters vary despite the varying width of the village's streets and paths and the height of the roof. This design variation may be misinterpreted as random or spontaneous. When designing the length and angle of the gutter, the intent is that the water drains into roads and corridors, provided that water does not return to the wall of the building and does not damage the opposite wall. Roads and paths are used to drain rainwater, so the roads are designed in a concave shape to collect water away from the foundations of the stone-reinforced buildings and drain it to feed the internal “Hesaw”, which is employed as a water distribution system inside the village, or to drain it outside the village through the main roads (Figure 3). The highest level in the village is the Majlis (the market), which is approximately 650 m above sea level, from which the level descends in all directions to reach the lowest point on the western side towards the valley, where the level reaches 643 m.

The connection of the village with Wadi Al-Rummah and its effect is evident. The abundance of the valley's water and the fertility of its land were the reason for the emergence of the village, and the prevention of the dangers of flooding the valley was the reason for the circular formation and the selection of the village's elevated location. In addition, the valley was the source of the village's building materials such as mud, tree stems, and smooth silt used to cover walls and floors for its solid and cohesive characteristics. Yet,

ironically, the valley caused the village's abandonment due to the large number and severity of its floods.



**Figure 3.** The mechanism of rainwater drainage from roofs and roads.

### 5. Rehabilitation Project

The village of Al-Khabra is one of the most essential and most ready heritage villages in the Kingdom for preservation and reviving. The mass eviction of its people in the year 1978 has helped preserve the natural traditional architectural elements by keeping the entire village intact without any significant changes or alterations to adapt to modern urbanization. Therefore, it is considered one of the most prominent tourist and heritage sites in the Qassim region. Yet the village was neglected and tampered with, and some of its buildings have fallen over the past three decades, unfortunately.

Work on the rehabilitation project for the heritage village began in 2007, hoping to restore life to the village and put it within the heritage villages on the Kingdom's tourist map. The work was initiated through coordinated efforts and practical cooperation between different government sectors such as the Emirate of the region, the Ministry of Tourism, and the local municipality. The rehabilitation project's main objective was investing in the village's cultural heritage to find an economic model to diversify sources of income by creating an economic identity that serves the village and the tourism sector in the region.

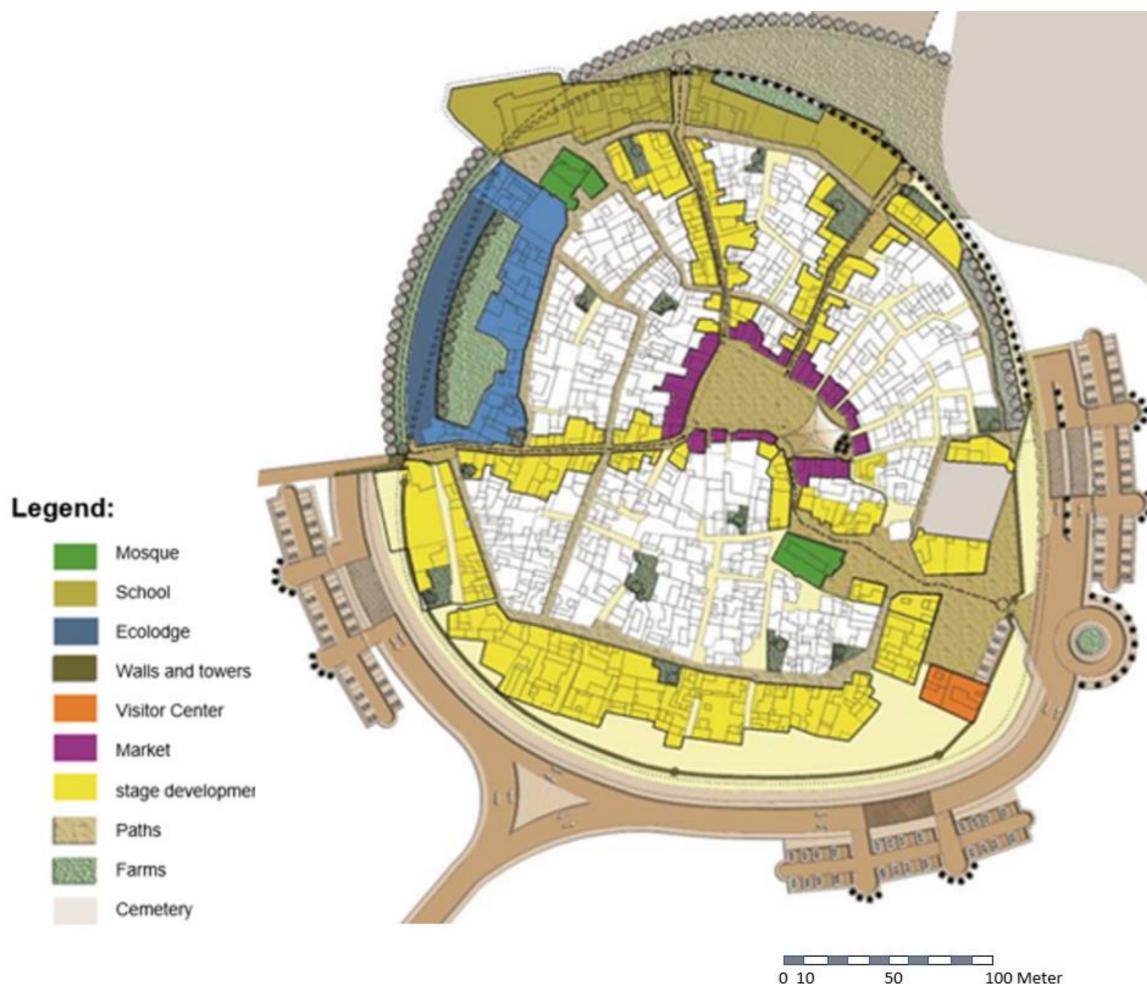
The project included preparing a detailed development study for the village to rehabilitate it. The development study included four main phases, the first of which consisted of conducting documentary and diagnostic studies of the current state of the village and its heritage landmarks. First, the heritage landmarks in the village were identified and documented by preparing a survey of its buildings and prominent landmarks and making engineering plans for them supported by visual documentation. This was followed by a diagnostic study for those buildings and documented landmarks by developing and approving evaluation forms that include criteria for evaluating the condition of each building separately in preparation for making design decisions regarding them. The second stage was to identify the nature of tourism in the region and the number and quality of accommodation and hospitality facilities through available surveys and statistical indicators. The third stage was the preparation of urban, architectural, and engineering studies for the rehabilitation of the village. In this stage, an urban development strategy was developed to rehabilitate the village, and architectural designs for some buildings that serve the development strategy and add value to the rehabilitation process were developed. In addition, the engineering plans for the infrastructure of the village and the criteria for the new additions in the rehabilitation processes have been prepared to keep pace with the practical needs of the users and at the same time preserve the heritage identity of the village. The fourth and final stage of this study was to propose a plan to protect and manage the village after the rehabilitation and development process [28].

The strategy for developing and rehabilitating the heritage village of Al-Khabra focused on highlighting and maximizing its characteristics and integrating its development

activities with the activities of local institutions. The strategy focused on maximizing three axes that specialized in Al-Khabra heritage village:

- Agriculture and its connection to Wadi Al-Rummah and its role in trade exchange with neighboring regions.
- The security fortification and the inviolability of the military village.
- Unique architectural and urban design.

Based on this general strategy, a comprehensive rehabilitation plan has been developed that includes the following points as shown on Figures 4–6: Taking advantage of the market square (the Majlis) as an arena for the village's public celebrations and organizing festivals.



**Figure 4.** The comprehensive plan for the development study of the village [28].



**Figure 5.** An old picture of the village before starting rehabilitation work (right) and an imaginary model according to the development study (left): [28].



**Figure 6.** An example of converting a building into an eco-lodge [28].

- Finding a museum and visitor center.
- Renewing the agricultural area to display the traditional farming methods in the area.
- Finding an eco-lodge and hotel in the area adjacent to the valley, which is characterized by the presence of an area devoid of buildings in front of it, enables the development of an eco-lodge in two parts: one of them is old by rehabilitating the old buildings, and the other is modern in the vacant land, to satisfy all the tastes of the guests.
- Providing shops where village visitors gather for the products of the village and the local community of different types of heritage, culture, and environment, including farm products with an economic concept that is carried out and supervised by the village workers.
- Rehabilitating the buildings on the main roads and reusing them, such as the Great Mosque and the mosque, and transforming some of them into museums, places of rest, and places where popular foods are served, including places for education and training, a library, and others.
- Creating a research center for traditional building materials or souvenirs, creating workshops for these materials, and linking them with relevant educational and professional institutions.
- Upgrading the level of service facilities and infrastructure.

## 6. Current Situation

Unfortunately, after a decade, the outputs of the development study were not fully implemented. Instead, the local municipality established a visitor center inside the village to receive visitors to the village and the restoration of 50 shops in the market, the Mosque, several buildings, the village wall, gates, and watchtowers. Unfortunately, despite the visual documentation of the village's landmarks and its buildings, some restorations violated the preservation and rehabilitation plan, which stipulates the preservation of the historical character. This annoyed some of the people who lived in the village and had deep memories and emotional ties there.

The literature identified several urban heritage preservation policies, differing from one study to another but all agree on the main activities represented in protection/preservation, maintenance/restoration, rehabilitation/reuse, and reconstruction/redevelopment [29,30]. All of these policies aim to achieve environmental and economic benefits for the urban heritage, and their diversity provides a broader space to choose the appropriate method and deal with the creative challenge of finding appropriate ways to meet the urban requirements of the archaeological site to be safe, sustainable and valuable on the one hand, and preserve its historical character on the other hand [31].

## 7. Field Observations

Two field visits were made to the village in different seasons. The field visits conducted yielded three significant findings that pertain to tourism in the village: the limited temporal and spatial scope, the nature of the activities offered, and the type of visitors. Despite the rehabilitation works being limited, they have played a role in reinvigorating life in the village. For instance, the Grand Mosque hosts daily prayer rites, and seasonal and economic activity is generated in the heritage village, which serves as a tourist destination during a limited number of seasonal events due to the lack of developed areas. However, the events and activities presented during these events lack proper marketing and are focused primarily on light commercial and recreational activities, with little emphasis placed on highlighting the cultural, urban, and natural characteristics of the village.

Subsequent to the rehabilitation works, events were held in the village, with the participation of 130 “producing” families and over 15 craftsmen who worked towards marketing their products during the events and activities held. It is noteworthy that the majority of visitors are locals, and the village struggles to attract visitors from outside the area.

## 8. Interviews

Three individuals were selected to participate in the interviews, each representing a different group: the government sector, the local community, and visitors. According to the government sector representative, the rehabilitation process initially relied on individual efforts and diligence but lacked professionalism and sufficient financial resources. Despite the creation of a comprehensive rehabilitation plan, the lack of necessary funding led to the project being curtailed and left incomplete.

The representative of the local community, a member of the local council, expressed satisfaction with the revival of the heritage village but was unhappy with the implementation mechanism. The community representative advocated for greater local participation to highlight the unique aspects of the village and to promote its economic potential.

The visitor interviewed was a 27-year-old man from Riyadh who frequently visits his family during seasonal holidays. He reported having visited the village multiple times with friends and family members, where he participated in commercial and recreational activities. However, he noted that the majority of visitors were from the local community and that the village's social environment was the primary motivator for repeat visits. The interviewee also observed that younger people tended to gravitate towards larger cities in the region, such as Buraidah and Unayzah.

## 9. Analysis

The problem of not implementing the outputs of the development study is due to the lack of balance between planning and implementation resources. The implementation process faced multiple challenges including financing, competition with other attractions, lack of coordination, and administrative organization of the tourism sector in the region. Heritage projects are financed either by the public or private sector or by a partnership between them. The type of finance depends significantly on the heritage and cultural value of the project. In my opinion, the problem occurred due to the absence of a comprehensive tourism strategy that defines objectives, priorities, financing plans, and various

partnerships. Furthermore, the abundance and diversity of heritage projects in the heritage preservation plan of the Heritage Authority, and the failure to set clear priorities for many diverse projects, may have missed the opportunity to monitor and reserve the budgets necessary for the development of the village and its rehabilitation process, either entirely or according to a phased plan.

The absence of a financing plan and the economic feasibility analysis in the development study did not encourage the private sector to implement the initiative. A stable and continuous financing mechanism must be found to avoid this problem, similar to the Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF) in the United Kingdom. The AHF is a charitable fund to finance urban heritage. It was established in 1976 to promote the preservation of historic buildings in the United Kingdom [32]. In addition, partners from the private sector and the local community must be supported while improving the administrative work of the mechanism for dealing with urban heritage management with the relevant authorities.

National statistical studies have shown that unregulated competition is the major problem and challenge facing business development in the tourism sector in the Kingdom. The problem of competition represents 54% of the fundamental challenges of the tourism sector, while weak demand represents 32%, and labor problems represent 20% [33]. Competition, usually, is a good thing because it helps in the processes of continuous improvement and raises the quality and value of the tourism product. However, the problem lies in the unregulated competition that deters the private sector from investing, either because of low returns or high risks.

The strategy for developing the village of Al-Khabra relied on heritage and environmental tourism. There are many attractive heritage sites in the Qassim region, which are promoted by the Ministry of Tourism and the Municipality of the region individually. Individual promotion does not serve any of these heritage sites due to their limited size and similarity of elements. The administrative organization of the tourism sector in the region is also blamed for the incompleteness of the elements of the successful tourism industry. One study indicates that the components of a thriving tourism industry depend on attraction locations that provide the appropriate needs of accommodation, hospitality, and transportation supported by travel agencies, tour operators, tourism marketing, and guidance (Figure 7) [34].



**Figure 7.** The components of the tourism industry.

Figure 7 depicts the essential components of the tourism industry that are crucial to the sustainability of heritage villages. In the context of Al-Khabra village, sustainable tourism development necessitates the preservation of its historical and cultural assets while providing visitors with an authentic experience. Attractive and culturally sensitive activities should be developed to promote the local culture, heritage, and environment while minimizing negative impacts on these resources. Additionally, the unique wheat crop of the village, Ma'iya, could be utilized to enhance the village's marketing efforts and increase its reputation and popularity, as shown in the case of Hungary where crops and food products have contributed to sustainable rural development [35].

To minimize the impact on the environment and local community, transportation options should be developed, such as promoting public transportation, bicycles, or walking.

Accommodation options should also be developed to complement the village's traditional architecture and landscape. One solution to this problem is to establish a comprehensive coordination mechanism that creates a thriving tourism heritage system based on excellence and integration with other potential sites, rather than competing with them. This coordination could be allocated to entities capable of delivering comprehensive services.

Al-Khabra heritage village has the elements of eco-tourism attractions. To develop such attractions, all internal and external variables must be reviewed and analyzed to discover the opportunities they provide or the resulting threats to increase their profitability and maximize their value. This can be achieved through flexible thinking based on deciding what to do to modify, add, delete, or acquire and by making the best use of limited resources without sacrificing quality.

The SWOT analysis has proved to be a useful and effective tool to analyze scientific research's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In the case of this study, the SWOT analysis helps to identify the internal and external factors that affect the sustainability of the heritage village and its eco-tourism investment. The SWOT analysis is used to unravel the strengths and weaknesses of the village's heritage and eco-tourism, and the opportunities and threats posed by the external environment, such as competition, environmental challenges, and changing tourism trends. Based on the findings, this study can develop recommendations and strategies to overcome the challenges and leverage the opportunities to sustain the village's heritage and eco-tourism investment.

Table 3 contains a summary of the analytical process for the characteristics of the heritage village of Al-Khabra using the SWOT method, which depends on identifying all the positive and negative characteristics, whether they are internal with direct impact, represented in strengths and weaknesses, or external with indirect impact, represented in opportunities and threats.

**Table 3.** SWOT Analysis of the heritage village of Al-Khabra.

	Properties
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coinciding with the Kingdom's Vision 2030 in support of the tourism sector. Including the updated academic calendar with many short vacations encourages domestic tourism, especially with plans to increase the population density of Riyadh, which is relatively close to the region. In addition, instant e-Visas help attract tourists from abroad who are looking to explore diverse cultures.</li> <li>• Having a development strategy, a comprehensive rehabilitation plan, and a completed protection plan for the village.</li> <li>• Posing a high heritage value as the village retains its heritage character despite the modern rehabilitation processes and the visual homogeneity of the buildings.</li> <li>• The village has preserved its tangible and intangible heritage that the villagers are proud of.</li> <li>• Having a good record of visual and spatial documentation of the village.</li> <li>• The village is located in the center of the Qassim region and is near many heritage landmarks.</li> <li>• Easy access to the village via highways that connect the nearby cities of Qassim, the airport, and the train station.</li> <li>• There is a high-value ecological nature where water, fertile soil, and clean air allow the exploitation of farms outside the walls of the village to cultivate and market the products for which the region is famous.</li> <li>• The flat topology allows easy roaming of wheelchairs and strollers in the village.</li> <li>• Possibility of providing sufficient parking spaces.</li> </ul>

**Table 3.** *Cont.*

		<b>Properties</b>
Weaknesses		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lack of elements of professional tourism work.</li> <li>• The lack of organized coordination between activities and tourist attractions in the region.</li> <li>• The deterioration of some heritage buildings, including the roofed corridors.</li> <li>• The lack of respect for heritage as a result of the construction of new buildings close to the site.</li> <li>• The lack of complete infrastructure (car parking, electricity, water, communication and information network, sewage, and rainwater drainage).</li> <li>• The lack of participation by some social groups in cultural activities.</li> <li>• The lack of sufficient economic fields, such as not economically activating traditional crafts and intangible heritage.</li> <li>• The lack of statistical surveys directed to the village.</li> </ul>
Opportunities		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilizing the village status to develop a new plan for the eco-tourism industry in the region.</li> <li>• Utilizing the village's unique advantages as a traditional eco-lodge.</li> <li>• Reviving the use of traditional construction materials.</li> <li>• Reviving the old market to promote traditional crafts and goods such as agricultural products and traditional foods.</li> <li>• Reviving traditional celebrations attracts many tourists.</li> <li>• Initiating eco-tourism activities by utilizing the lands near the village as a tourist attraction and agricultural resting place and creating organic and small farms using the old traditional methods of farming; marketing them as rest stops for daily picnics.</li> <li>• Using the people's cooperation to create a sustainable development project.</li> <li>• Developing spaces and paths for practicing desert sports such as horse and camel riding.</li> <li>• Developing an advanced lighting system that highlights the importance of the village's outer perimeter and diversifies the spatial memory and exploratory experience.</li> </ul>
Threats		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threats of a complete collapse of heritage buildings.</li> <li>• The difficulty of operating, maintaining, and preserving the village outside the tourist seasons.</li> <li>• Threats relating to the fact that the village is on the banks of Wadi Al-Rama.</li> <li>• Threats as a result of unregulated investment along the road leading to the village.</li> <li>• Traditional customs are threatened and subject to extinction.</li> <li>• Lack of employment opportunities for young people.</li> </ul>

## 10. Proposed Solution

From the findings of the above SWOT analysis, it is evident that the village is a good candidate for eco-tourism, supported by the positive impact of the tourism sector of Vision 2030, yet the need for professional tourism marketing is essential. The heritage village of Al-Khabra is qualified to play a prominent integrative role in eco-tourism in the Qassim region for several reasons, the most important of which is the preservation of the village in its traditional form without any significant disturbing alterations. This readiness allows the utilization and operation of the entire village and facilitates the process of developing some of its buildings to be an eco-lodge managed and operated by the people of the region. This trend is supported by surveys that indicate that visitors to the area prefer to stay in furnished housing units, perhaps because they are financially or socially appropriate. This

style leads to prioritizing investments and the feasibility of considering a different and attractive accommodation style that depends on the provision of accommodation services.

Accommodation services that provide a traditional local environment will enable its visitors to experience the old village environment in the atmosphere of a family outing supported by quality services. These services contain essential economic activities such as providing traditional food and beverages and multiple outlets to market local products. The village's central location in the Qassim region, which is rich in archaeological sites and eco-tourism, supports the idea of making it a strategic place of residence and a starting point for visits to the scattered tourist attractions in the region. Heritage villages in the region are rich in cultural and historical importance because they represent the living embodiment of human history and thought. The urban heritage in these villages can be dealt with in many ways, including its inclusion in eco-tourism and enrichment of cultural experiences [5].

Hence, it is safe to say that Al-Khabra village can be presented as a model for the rehabilitation of urban heritage sites within the concept of eco-tourism as a proposed tourist model. The model depends on balancing several different axes, the most important of which are the heritage, economic, and social aspects. The integration of these dimensions will have positive consequences on the environmental, economic, and social aspects. At the environmental level, the proposed model will contribute to preserving the heritage and the built environment by strengthening the principle of cooperation and participation between the local community, the central authority, the competent authorities, and other partners in the development, preservation, protection, and management of the village. The proposed model will also benefit the local community through their participation in planning and decision-making, training, and providing them with job opportunities, which will raise the productivity of the local community through the optimal use of natural resources, traditional crafts, and cultural services in the village, and the employment for the people of the village. This, in turn, will benefit the local community to develop and increase their agricultural, handicraft, and cultural products and develop the appropriate infrastructure such as accommodation and hospitality services, and so on.

The eco-tourism system based on the exploitation of urban heritage is one of the main activities that resist the cultural invasion of Western civilizations in the third world and enhance the local identity by emphasizing cultural and architectural heritage as the primary goal [35]. This also makes these heritage sites attractive areas for extra-curricular activities in educational institutions for school and university students.

The eco-lodge is also characterized by financial sustainability and limited size, as stated in the (International Ecolodge Guidelines) [36]. This model, based on attracting limited numbers of tourists, suits the size of the Al-Khabra village and its limited resources, and thus its sustainability. In addition, eco-tourists by nature prefer to spend their money on gaining deep social and cultural experiences rather than obtaining luxury tourist services [37]. This is achievable through community participation in administration and operation. However, studies indicate the need to find a balance between tourism growth and natural and cultural resources in tourism projects because the growth of tourism projects aims to generate quick profit that may lead to adverse effects on the environment and tourism activities.

The recent promotion of the General Authority for Tourism and National Heritage to an independent ministry boosts the tourism sector in Saudi Arabia. The main objective of the newly initiated ministry is to organize, develop, and market tourist activities internally and externally. Among its most prominent achievements within the Kingdom's Vision 2030 is providing electronic visas at the airport to foreign tourists from a select 49 countries. This approach enhances the attractiveness of the heritage village in attracting tourists wishing to explore different cultures. This, however, requires strengthening the components of the tourism industry and professional marketing mechanisms, which have a positive impact on the economy. One of the objectives of tourism marketing is to plant positive tourist impressions, through a good marketing strategy that seeks to achieve the satisfaction of the

tourist by giving him/her a living experience that fits his or her expectations and enhances the positive impression around the tourist area. The strategy also seeks to achieve an operational economy, which supports the sustainability of tourism activity in the region. The strategy adopts coordination and integration between marketing and other activities in the region to develop the incoming tourism movement [38]. This requires the formation of specialized teams to organize trips, develop targeted tourist packages, and activate the establishment of events and festivals. One study examined the impact of rural activities and festivals, especially those related to food, on improving the economic situation of the local community and activating the role of women in it by attracting tourists of all age groups [26]. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) report indicates that tour operators clearly contribute to the promotion of tourism, and their contribution may reach 50% of international tourism [39].

It also noted a change in the pattern of domestic tourism, which was partially helped by the pandemic conditions in the previous period. Domestic tourism represents an important source of national income and achieves the country's internal economic balance and its role in developing the various productive sectors. The activation of domestic tourism encourages the completion and improvement of tourism facilities, which enhances the ability of those facilities to attract foreign tourism [40]. Despite the severe lack of accurate statistics directed to the Al-Khabra village, valuable statistical indicators can be extracted from the surveys of the General Authority for Tourism and the General Antiquities of the region regarding the purpose of the visit and the amount of expenditure. Statistics indicate that most of the visits were for family communication, so it is necessary to work on a marketing plan for tourism facilities and activities to attract many local and expatriate visitors alike, especially in light of the plurality of short and numerous vacations in the upcoming academic calendar and the possibility of increasing the population density of the city of Riyadh perspective. Statistics indicate that the number of visits to the Qassim region doubled twice within a decade and that the volume of local tourism expenditures tripled for the same period [41–48]. The multiplicity of short vacations during the year and the intensification of the population of Riyadh to double, necessitate work to strengthen the elements of professional marketing and the initiation of tourism packages suitable for different seasons. The relatively inexpensive transportation fares in Saudi Arabia help prepare affordable tourism packages, where the transportation costs in travel represent a significant percentage that may reach 50% of the total cost [49–51].

## 11. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examines the current status of the heritage village of Al-Khabra and proposes a development and marketing proposal to revitalize it through eco-tourism standards. Although a comprehensive plan was previously developed, restoration efforts in Al-Khabra heritage village have been inadequate, resulting in limited guidance, poor presentation, and lackluster tourism attractions. Nevertheless, the village has significant potential to emerge as a notable eco-tourism destination, providing employment opportunities for the local populace and preserving the natural environment. The recommendations formulated for the village take into account the critical factors identified during the analysis process and suggest various strategies and actions to address challenges and exploit opportunities to ensure the sustainability of the eco-tourism investment. The proposed plan strives to strike a balance between community development, cultural heritage preservation, and sustainable tourism, thereby creating an unparalleled visitor experience. Notwithstanding Al-Khabra's potential as an eco-tourism destination, derelict structures require urgent protection, rehabilitation, and reuse. To promote sustainable development, it is crucial to educate both the local community and visitors on the significance of preserving the environment, culture, and heritage. Additionally, documenting the urban and architectural elements of the village and implementing protective measures to counteract weather and erosion factors are vital for safeguarding the village's cultural heritage.

To make Al-Khabra village competitive in eco-tourism, several strategies could be considered:

- Preserve the cultural heritage: The restoration of historic buildings and preservation of cultural heritage is an essential element of eco-tourism in Al-Khabra village. It would be essential to protect the unique cultural identity of the village and ensure that tourism activities do not harm the historic buildings.
- Develop a strong brand identity: Focusing on the village's unique features and developing effective marketing strategies to promote Al-Khabra village as a unique and sustainable tourism destination can increase its visibility and attract more visitors. This can include online and offline marketing campaigns, social media promotions, and collaborations with travel agencies and tour operators.
- Offer unique and authentic experiences: Develop unique and authentic tourism experiences that showcase the natural beauty, history, and culture of Al-Khabra village. This can include cultural events, traditional crafts, local cuisine, and guided tours that offer visitors an authentic and immersive experience.
- Promote community-based tourism: Involve the local community in the development and promotion of tourism activities to ensure that local culture and traditions are respected and that the benefits of tourism are shared with the community. Additionally, it can create a sense of ownership and promote sustainable development.
- Provide high-quality tourism services: Offer high-quality tourism services that meet the needs and expectations of visitors, including excellent customer service, well-trained and knowledgeable guides, and well-maintained tourism facilities.
- Develop partnerships and collaborations: Developing partnerships with local and national tourism organizations, as well as private and public stakeholders, could help attract more investment, marketing, and promotion of the village as an eco-tourism destination.

These strategies can be implemented by:

- Developing national policies that regulate the preservation of local resources and biodiversity, the protection of tangible and cultural heritage, building effective partnerships between the public and private sectors, strengthening the role of local communities, and developing indicators for measuring the performance of sustainable heritage tourism.
- Enhancing the effective participation of local authorities, represented by the branches of the Ministry of Tourism and the Heritage Authority of the Ministry of Culture in the regions, in the coordination processes for the establishment and implementation of sustainable heritage tourism projects by ensuring their compatibility with national policies as well as by providing technical and administrative assistance to local municipalities and facilitating the process of financing sustainable heritage tourism projects and initiatives.
- Consulting with and engage stakeholders to identify priority issues and indicators relevant to the sustainability of heritage tourism, through the use of smart governance tools to help address conflicting goals, gain commitment to the effective implementation of decisions, and communicate more effectively about decisions and risks associated with sustainable heritage tourism development options.
- Establishing interest groups to promote cultural tourism, increase community participation, provide training and education, emphasize sustainability, and build partnerships.
- Seeking funding from government and non-government organizations to support the implementation of these recommendations.

## 12. Future Research

There are areas of research that could be explored in the future to enhance the understanding of eco-tourism development in Al-Khabra village and to promote sustainable tourism practices such as:

- Policy and planning: Analyzing the policies and planning frameworks that support sustainable tourism development in Al-Khabra village. This would help to identify any gaps or challenges in the current policy and planning framework and recommend improvements.
- Tourist behavior: Exploring tourist behavior and preferences regarding eco-tourism in Al-Khabra village. This includes understanding their motivations, expectations, and satisfaction levels with the destination.
- Innovation and technology: Exploring the use of innovative and sustainable technologies in eco-tourism development in Al-Khabra village. This includes exploring the use of renewable energy, waste management, and smart technologies to enhance the sustainability of tourism practices in the village.

Al-Khabra village can position itself as a competitive and sustainable eco-tourism destination that provides unique and memorable experiences to visitors while benefiting the local community and preserving its cultural and natural heritage.

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